

February 6, 2011 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

The Light of the World: Who We Really Are

Isaiah 58:1-12 *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly....*

Psalm 112 *[Those who fear the Lord] rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.*

Matthew 5:13-20 *"You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."*

Our readings for today are full of light images, and they all apply to us! In the psalm, those who "fear the Lord," that is, who live with awareness and love of God, are lights illuminating others' lives. Their "light" is their graciousness, mercy, and right dealings with others, which is the biblical meaning of righteousness. In Isaiah, the people of Israel and their leaders are told that when they feed the hungry, house the homeless, show mercy and compassion, then their light will become like dawn. They will experience the presence of God and their own healing. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples, with the crowd listening in, that they are the light of the world, and need to let their light shine forth so that others see and give glory to God. To me the message is quite simple: We are light, and when we live that way, others know they are light, too.

Unfortunately, this has not been the primary message of the church through the centuries. Rather than hearing that they are lights created to shine in the world, people have heard about an inner darkness called "original sin." We have been told we are born sinners, can do nothing good on our own, and need a "savior" to come and make us something we are not -- acceptable or worthy before God. Rather than trust ourselves as created by God in goodness, we have been taught to distrust, and, in the extreme, to hate ourselves. There are a few places in Hebrew and Christian scriptures from which such a view might be constructed, but you know what I've discovered through the years? That is not the major emphasis or testimony of scripture. If anything, it is a minor viewpoint that has been made into the whole thing. And for sure, it misses the truly life-giving and empowering meaning of our spiritual tradition.

We are born sinners, but Jesus came to save us so that we can go to heaven. That is the gist of what has become, at least in our culture, a dominant message of the church. The problem is that Jesus never talked that way, and most of scripture does not talk that way. Growing up in the church, I became increasingly aware of a contradiction. On the one hand, I was aware of the message that we were no-good sinners who had to be "saved" in order to go to heaven. That was

the meaning of Jesus' death. God paid the price with the death of "his" son so that our sins would be forgiven. I heard that message--though not from my father's sermons--sang hymns about it, but it never made any sense to me. And it was a terrible picture of God--a parent who would will the death of a child as some kind of sacrifice.

I came to realize that the church had misrepresented things. Jesus died "for" our sins was the message. Yet, in the few places where scripture speaks in this way, the translation can just as well be, Jesus died "because of" our sins. That I can understand! It makes perfect sense that Jesus' death happened because he threatened the status quo in politics and religion and culture. He revealed the emptiness of power and violence and material gain. He told people to love their enemies, not kill them. He said that the ultimate meaning of our lives has to do with caring for the needs of human beings, not believing this or that doctrine. He said and did lots of things that made him a marked man. He died, I believe, "because" of human sin, at the hands of those who saw him as a threat. Jesus was concerned about THIS life and how we live it, and that's what got him in trouble.

Then there was the other side of the contradiction I felt in the church's message. Fortunately, I grew up in a church tradition that valued the freedom of persons to think for themselves, to read scripture for themselves and decide what they thought; a church that sounded God's call in Jesus to live a life of prayer and service, to be part of the healing of life; a church that supported amazing work being done by people in our own and other nations to improve the lives of the poor, the sick, the hungry, the uneducated. If all of this was going on, I wondered, how come we are worthless, terrible sinners who can do nothing good? Here was a different picture of Jesus, one much closer to what I heard and read in the gospels. He was the one who showed us who we really and truly are, and called us to live out our true identities as God's beloved daughters and sons. He was the one who looked on us with forgiveness and compassion, because we DO get lost and live in ways contrary to how we are created and meant to live. Jesus was the one who teaches and empowers us in the right ways to live. To me, the crucifixion came to mean that the power structures were able to kill Jesus, but they could not put him away! Everything he was about was too true, too powerful, too life-giving to die.

As I read the scripture passages for this Sunday, I was profoundly aware that we have been conditioned to read scripture in ways that cause us to miss what is all over its pages. We are people created by God to live together in justice, compassion, generosity, and peace. We can do it because we are made that way. Isaiah's point is that the people have gotten lost in religion. They are doing the right religious things, but they have stopped being human! The people are complaining about spiritual emptiness. We pray and worship and fast, and yet we don't see God.

We aren't experiencing God. Where is God? How can I really experience God's presence and healing and power?

Isaiah answers that God is not found by being religious, but in true spirituality, that is, life lived in harmony with who we are created to be, with who we truly are as human beings. What you are calling a fast, says God, is not the fast I'm looking for! The fast that gets my attention is when you live in compassion, justice, mercy, love, and peace, when you open your life to meet some need in the world, when you step out of your self-protective shell and reach out to others--then your light will shine. Then you will experience the reality of God. Then you will know what it means to be whole. Then you will call to God and God will answer right away: Here I am! When we are engaged in BOTH the inward journey of prayer, worship, reflection, AND the outward journey of touching some need in the world around us, THEN we will know the reality and presence of God. No problem!

Isaiah and all the other prophets of Israel do not assume that people are born separated from God and are unable to live as they are meant to live. They assume the opposite, that people are created by God to live in life-giving ways and can choose to do so. We can and need to talk about the reality of sin, but not as some corrupt nature in us. Sin is getting lost from the paths of right living, or making choices that bring harm to others, the creation, and ourselves, or buying into values that go against who we really are. Sin is what happens, for example, in our legislatures when budgets are slashed so that the most vulnerable people suffer, while the wealthiest and most powerful continue to gain. Isaiah speaks God's word to Israel so that the people and their leaders might return to compassion, mercy, justice, and generosity. When they do that, they will experience the presence of God and their own healing.

Jesus is saying the same thing. You are the salt of the earth. You have it in you to be a kind of preservative. Kaye's parents in Kentucky talked about "old ham". That meant ham that had been salt cured, sometimes for years. I remember the story of someone who unearthed a ham from the days of the Civil War, and it was still good to eat! Jesus did not go into detail about this image of our being salt. He leaves it to our imaginations, to think about ways we can preserve and add flavor to life. Whatever it means it is a positive image meant to affirm and inspire us. But, says Jesus, we CAN lose our saltiness, that quality that makes us such persons. We can squander it through neglect, or we can choose to think and act in ways that are destructive to life. Losing our saltiness is something else Jesus leaves for us to contemplate.

You are the light of the world. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket, but on a stand so that it gives light to the whole house. Let your light shine so that people can see your good works and give glory to God. It does not get much more positive than that! We are

light and made to be light. We are not meant to live with a sense of shame and hiding, putting the light of our life under a bushel basket. We are to let the light of our lives shine in the world. Not so that we get credit for anything, or that we are somehow earning spiritual points, but so that others can see the light and be the light themselves!

Our true nature is goodness, light, compassion, justice, mercy. That is who we really are. There is no doubt that life in this world has a way of making us forget who we are, luring us away into all kinds of illusions and distractions. This is why the vision of our community is so important. When we make a commitment to our own lives as people of faith, we work daily with an inward journey that roots and grounds us in who we really are--God's beloved children who are light and salt--and an outward journey in which we express God's love for the world through the particular callings and gifts God gives us. The underlying assumption of this community, whether it was always acknowledged or not, is that we are created good, made for being and sharing light, and able to be and become the persons God made us to be. It is not easy. It takes attention and work, sometimes hard struggle inwardly and outwardly. Yet it has to do with knowing and being who we really and truly are.